

## A Sermon for DaySpring

By Barry Harvey

### THE THINGS THAT MAKE FOR PEACE

Psalms 85:7–13, Isaiah 37:30–35, 1 Corinthians 11:17–26, Luke 19:41–44

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The Lord be with you.

Let's pray: Almighty and merciful God, our rock and redeemer, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This morning we observe the first Sunday in the Season of Peace and Justice. The themes are important to us as Christians because they are prominent in Jesus's life and ministry. The word peace appears over twenty times in the four gospels; the idea of justice and its fraternal twin righteousness over thirty-five times.

Peace is also a pressing concern because there is so little of it in our world. From the wars that currently inflict death and destruction in virtually every corner of the globe to the hatred and division that have so many at odds with one another in the United States and other countries, it is crystal clear that, as Jesus says in our gospel reading for this morning, humankind does not recognize the things that make for peace.

My suggestion for us this morning is that we hear Jesus's lament over the impending fate of Jerusalem as a question he puts to us: do we as members of Christ's body recognize the way of peace, here, now, in our own lives, and in this troubled, violent world with which we must contend?

The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*, and it means far more than simply the absence of conflict on an international stage. And more than simply the serenity we desire as individuals. It refers to well-being, wholeness, health, and harmony in every dimension of creation, from the inner serenity we experience in our personal lives to the order of cosmos, from the greeting that we shall share with each other at the end of our service to the Jesus's command to a storm on the Sea of Galilee, "Peace! Be still!"

The first verses in the Old Testament reading from Isaiah provide us a vision of genuine peace. The image of people living in harmony with the earth, eating what it produces of itself, and then from what is sown, reaped, and planted, is a parable of the house of Judah having deep roots and bearing abundant fruit in the *shalom* of God.

It's important to remember that among the things that make for peace in Scripture is the doing of justice. When the people of Israel just could not understand what God expects from them, the first thing the prophet Micah says to them was, "Do justice." Though the idea of justice is often bandied about by those with agendas of all sorts, but it basically refers to the desire and inclination to render to others what is due them. For Christians, what we owe to others is determined above all by our belief that every person is made in the image of God, an image that is none other than Jesus. Whenever justice is denied there can be no peace, no well-being or wholeness within ourselves, no peace between persons or between groups in

communities and nations. If humankind wishes to dwell in the house of God's love revealed in Christ, we must enter that house by way of the front porch of justice.

According to Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament reading for today—particularly the background story to it—offers us a way of thinking about the things that make for peace in our own time. In the chapters leading up to the prophet Isaiah's assurance to King Hezekiah that Judah's enemies would not breach the walls of Jerusalem, there is a serious conversation, or rather **two** conversations, about the things that make for peace. These conversations occur in connection with a dramatic confrontation that takes place at the city wall of Jerusalem in about the year 701 B.C.E. between the spokesman of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, and the representatives of King Hezekiah.

If Scripture used the rating system we employ to rate restaurants and hotels, Hezekiah was one of only two kings in the Old Testament to get four stars. Virtually all the other kings barely scored one star, if that. Hezekiah receives his high rating because he initiated reforms in Israel's worship, ridded the countryside of idols, and in general sought to obey the commandments given by God to Moses.

Assyria, on the other hand, was the evil empire of its day. If our Bibles came with movie soundtracks, the arrival of Sennacherib's army on the stage would be accompanied by the theme announcing the arrival of Darth Vader of *Star Wars*, or for those of us from an older generation, perhaps the theme music from *Jaws*. The Assyrians had been running roughshod over the cities and villages in the area, as nation after nation fell before the might of Sennacherib's chariots, including the northern Kingdom of Israel, and now little Judah was up next.

Initially, Hezekiah thought he could repel Assyria's invasion by the same strategies followed by other nations in the region, trusting in his military and making alliances, with Egypt in particular. Isaiah tried to warn the king not to ally himself with Egypt just for their horses or to put his trust in their chariots. "The Egyptians are human, and not God;" Isaiah insists, "their horses are flesh, and not spirit."

Sure enough, Hezekiah's allies proved to be no match for the sheer power of Assyria. Sennacherib's army laid waste to the cities of Syria, Phoenicia, the Philistines, and Samaria, Israel's capital city of Israel, deporting their populations to Ninevah and the other cities of the empire. And the Egyptians? They sat this one out. Before long, forty-six cities and towns of Judah lay in ruins, and thousands were taken captive by the Assyrians. And now, the citadel of Jerusalem stood alone.

It was at this point that the first of these two serious conversations about the things that make for peace takes place. With the head of the Assyrian delegation standing at the wall that surrounds Jerusalem, Sennacherib's envoy, the Rabshakeh (which means chief among the princes), taunts, threatens, and demands unconditional surrender from the city. He even mocks God, suggesting that the LORD is no different than the other nations' deities who were unable to deliver their peoples. The envoy even offers to give Hezekiah 2,000 horses to see whether he could muster enough riders to take them into battle against even one of Sennacherib's regiments. Surely, the Rabshakeh reasoned, there is "no real alternative to surrender." Recent history and common sense made it evident that trusting in God was foolish.

Sennacherib's envoy promises the inhabitants of Jerusalem that if they would capitulate there would be peace, but it was a counterfeit peace in comparison to the peace Israel's God provides. Moreover, there

was a steep price to be paid by the inhabitants of Jerusalem in exchange for this counterfeit peace: subjection to Assyrian rule, a burdensome annual tribute, and eventual expulsion from the land that the God of their ancestors promised to them.

There is, however, a second conversation that takes place “behind the wall, inside the city, [where] a different language is spoken by a different set of people with a different agenda.” When Hezekiah heard what the Assyrians were demanding, he humbled himself before the LORD, tore his garments, covered himself with sackcloth, and appealed to Isaiah for guidance. The prophet told the king that because he had repented of his feeble and foolish attempt to play the game of thrones against the Assyrians, and prayed to God for deliverance, Jerusalem would be spared, and his enemy would be forced to withdraw.

This second conversation between Hezekiah and Isaiah, which occurred out of the earshot of the Assyrians, was actually a continuation of the conversation that God had begun with Israel when he led them out of the oppression of Egypt and entered into an everlasting covenant with them at Mt. Sinai. The story of Israel narrates a different story that runs counter to the dominant accounts of tyrants, kingdoms, and empires, who regularly usurp the place of God in their desire to possess the world.

We see in the story of the Exodus the distinctive pattern to the way God works to redeem the world and bring about peace. As biblical scholar Gerhard Lohfink puts it, God “desires the overturning, the radical alteration of the whole society—for in this the revolutionaries are right: what is at stake is the whole world, and the change must be radical, for the misery of the world cries to heaven, and it begins deep within the human heart. But how can anyone change the world and society at its roots without taking away the freedom that God had given them?”

The answer, says Lohfink, is that it “can only be that God begins in a small way, at one single place in the world. There must be a place, visible, tangible, where the salvation of the world can begin...where the world becomes what it is supposed to be according to God's plan. Beginning at that place, the new thing can spread abroad, but not through persuasion, not through indoctrination, not through violence. Everyone must have the opportunity to come and see. All must have the chance to behold and test this new thing. Then, if they want to, they can allow themselves to be drawn into the history of salvation that God is creating. Only in that way can their freedom be preserved. What drives them to the new thing cannot be force, not even moral pressure, but only the fascination of a world that is changed.”

The calling of the descendants of Sarah and Abraham, the nation of Israel, the people of the covenant, including those of us who were once strangers and without hope in the world but have been brought near by the life and death of Christ, is to be that place where all the peoples of the world have the opportunity to come and see the things that make for peace.

By contrast, Assyria, like every huge, tyrannical empire, sees nothing wrong in what they do. That is the way of the world, isn't it? Big fish eats little fish, big dog bullies the little dog, the strong rule over the weak; in every case the desire for glory and dominance, and an insatiable avarice make the world go round. For those who envision the world this way, peace is simply whatever benefits the mighty. The rest of us just have to play along.

But God has covenanted with us, with the people of Exodus and Esther, to be for the world a demonstration project, to let the world see for itself the peace that is found in trusting God and practicing a way of life that does justice, embraces lovingkindness, and walks humbly before God.

Without that second conversation between Isaiah and Hezekiah about the things that really make for peace that goes on behind the city wall, then, a conversation that operates with a different perception and a different way of living in the world, how the powerful of this world see matters cannot help but appear absolute, account for all the evidence, and face no serious criticism. Were it not for this second conversation behind the wall, Hezekiah would have likely concluded that the God of Israel was no different than all the other impotent gods and that he had no other option than to submit to Assyria's demands.

Sadly, few rulers in Israel and Judah were as humble and as obedient as Hezekiah, and that held true in Jesus's day. During his ministry Jesus, drawing extensively on the testimony of the Law, Prophets, and Psalms, not only taught all who would listen the things that made for peace but showed it to them in all that he did, and he commanded his followers to do so as well. But the rulers and people of Jerusalem, Judea, and Galilee did not, for whatever reason, call to mind what Isaiah had said to Hezekiah. They forgot *who* they were, and more importantly, they forgot *whose* they were. Their trust was elsewhere than in what God would provide, and so, with few exceptions, they disregarded what Jesus was saying and doing.

Now the empires of the ancient world—Hittites, Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Turks—have all disappeared from the pages of history, but the two conversations that occurred more than two and a half millennia ago at the wall of Jerusalem continue to shape how people today envision the world and how they should think, feel, and act in it.

What does the conversation that still takes place “outside the wall,” as it were, sound like in the modern world? In many ways, the more things have changed the more they have stayed the same. Every time we log on to the internet, stream a movie, open a magazine, or just chat with the people we encounter every day, we are inundated by the conversation outside the wall, by what the world at large thinks is just way things are, enticing us in a thousand different ways to believe that success and wealth, status and power, safety and prosperity are the things that make life worth living.

Self-interest, looking out for number one, is the only rule, and if you must step on a few others as you make your way up the ladder, well, that's unfortunate, but that's just the way the world works, right? And for those who suffer at the hands of others, who are used up and then discarded like yesterday's trash, the ways of this world can seem sadly invincible, and any hope they might have had gives way to despair.

There is one new twist in this centuries-long conversation outside the wall. We have been trained by the modern world to compartmentalize our lives, to think, feel, and act one way in our private lives, another way in the political realm, yet another in our professional lives, and of course, to make sure we are clear about the difference between “us” and “them.” If there is an old-fashioned word that both sides in the partisan political divide would like us to forget, it is “integrity,” the notion that every aspect of our lives are to be integrated with all the others into a whole by whatever it is that is our highest good.

In this light, and given what is going on in our world, from domestic violence to the conflicts that hold so many in war's deadly and destructive grip, it is clear that what makes for peace is not self-evident. What the world needs is a community that lets it see what peace looks like on the ground, in real life, in mundane as well as desperate situations. What the world needs is a people who offer an alternative to the fear, hatred, and division that is so prominent in our world, which embodies in its way of life the well-being, wholeness, and harmony that is the *shalom* of God.

The good news of the gospel is that God's love which is revealed in Christ frees us from all ethnic, national, or familial loyalties, from every tribe and language and people and nation, to be this people of peace in the world. But this venture of peace doesn't just happen. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, speaking to an ecumenical group during the early days of National Socialism, says that peace must be dared and that this venture can never be made safe. Peace is the opposite of security, and to demand guarantees is to mistrust, and it is mistrust that in turn fosters conflict. The way of peace, in other words, is the way of the cross.

So where does this conversation behind the wall take place today for us? Most of the serious conversations in my family growing up took place around the dinner table. It's where we talked about what Mom and Dad expected of us and those times when we didn't live up to their expectations; it's where we learned about our grandparents' illnesses and their eventual passing. It was at the dinner table where we would talk about where we might go to college and what our major might be or who we were thinking of marrying; it was where mom and dad first raised the possibility that the family might move to California, and then three years later, thankfully, that we were moving back to Colorado.

The table is also where we in the body of Christ are introduced to the second conversation behind the wall. Sometimes what we experience in communion is unexceptional. On occasion, however, something happens that opens a view of the world in a way that we have never experienced before.

Five years ago, a group of DaySpringers went down to San Antonio to learn from our sisters and brothers at the Mennonite Church there how DaySpring might respond to the human crisis that is taking place at the border of Texas and Mexico. One result of this is the Naomi House. Before returning to Waco we worshipped with the Mennonites on Sunday morning, the service culminating with communion. As I went forward, I received the body of Christ from a woman who was seeking asylum from violence in her native Honduras.

We had met her earlier that weekend when we learned that her husband and elder son were murdered by gang members, and they threatened not only her but also her daughter and younger son. They left Honduras and made what was an arduous, unimaginably horrific journey on foot to the southern border of the United States, where she applied for and was granted asylum. She was admitted to the United States but was separated from her two children for months. She was reunited first with her daughter, but for a time, her son was still lost in the system. It was on the weekend of our visit to San Antonio that her son was finally able to rejoin his mother and sister.

As I received the body of Christ from one who had known firsthand the violence and hatred of this world I said to myself, this meal, this community, this story that we tell at the Lord's table, this is the peace that surpasses all understanding; this is the wholeness, the well-being, to which Christ calls us. Bound together by the bond of baptism, I recognized with a renewed focus that the ways we so readily pit people

against one other, creating an animosity and distrust, have no place in our lives as followers of Jesus. I realized with an intensity I had rarely felt that Christ is our peace, who breaks down the walls of hostility that divide our world into warring camps.

And so, Christ bids us to come dine with him at this table. Let us break bread and celebrate the *shalom* of God and pledge ourselves anew to let the world see in us the things that make for peace.

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